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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a program designed to provide a unified sequence of graduate studies for principal certification in Alaska. The University of Alaska Learning Cooperative offers a single set of statewide program requirements, which reduces the costly duplication of instructional services and staff-development programs. The paper describes the program's development, rationale, governance, and elements. The core element is the year-long internship. Students also participate in weekly distance-delivered leadership seminars that focus on finance and facilities, personnel and labor relations, and community relations in diverse settings. Students continue to work with mentors for 1 year after completion of program requirements. The program features university-school district cooperation, the yearly appointment of practitioners to act as mentors, and a balance between campus- and field-based course work. (LMI)

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA LEARNING COOPERATIVE: AN INNOVATIVE STATEWIDE PROGRAM IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the decades, our nation's public schools have been called upon to provide an expanding array of academic and non-instructional services to an increasingly diverse population. This pursuit has drawn continuous social commentary from its beginning to the present day. While a stable majority has supported these efforts, others have challenged basic educational objectives and practices. The clamor for school improvement in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly targeting the scholastic programs to adopt new operating procedures, also generated awareness of the need to reform American institutions of higher education, the very colleges and universities that train and recommend their graduates for public school teaching and administrative positions.

Alaska, although geographically detached from the contiguous United States, was not isolated from these socio-political stirrings that led to the evaluation of its public schools and universities. Reform efforts directed at all levels of the educational enterprise on the nation's "last frontier" were paralleling kindred activities in

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"Lower 48" states. Highlighting the need to evaluate state education programs was also tied to local examples of a sluggish national economy. This condition was especially germane in Alaska where significant revenue losses from the giant Prudhoe Bay petroleum fields created statewide budgetary retrenchment. The state had to find new moneys for governmental operations, create innovative and cost-effective measures of delivering services, or begin downsizing state and local programs.

Aside from the budgetary retrenchment issue, Alaskan school superintendents, at a recent annual meeting, suggested that the University of Alaska president investigate the potential of providing non-classroom-based offerings in educational leadership similar to the ones contained in the former practitioner- and field-oriented Alaska Center for Educational Leadership (AkCEL) project. AkCEL, a federally-funded pilot project seeking to improve the pre-service training of school principals, was an outgrowth of the extensive federal-state Leadership in Educational Administration Development (Project LEAD) initiative. In responding to this practitioner challenge, the university president appointed a statewide committee to address the issue. To move toward assessing the need to consider a single-standard program in Alaska, a school of education dean was named to hold a series of campus meetings and audioconferences with faculty members from the three campus centers, school superintendents, school principals, and the executive director of the state school administrators association.

DEVELOPING THE PROGRAM

In developing a model for consideration, a subcommittee drafted proposals that broached the concerns mentioned by the superintendent's group and proposed strengthening the effectiveness of university offerings through a more comprehensive field-based academic model of instruction. The working group reviewed an array of professional texts and articles, surveyed approximately eighteen of the operating Danforth Foundation leadership projects, and queried leading scholars and practicing administrators in Alaska and other states. Danforth activities held the promise of illustrating how field-based course work and internships could increase the value of pre-service programs.

Throughout this research and development phase, the committee members benefited from widespread encouragement and valued suggestions from the Danforth Foundation President, the Alaska Commissioner of Education, the executive director of the South East [Alaska] Regional Resource Center, and chief school officials from rural and urban regions within the state. To discuss collegial concerns that surfaced within the statewide university system, an interactive videoconference among the faculties of the three schools of education provided an opportunity to share collective visions and to heighten general awareness for the need to develop inter-campus cooperative programming.

PROGRAM RATIONALE

The purpose of the adopted program was to provide a unified sequence of graduate studies for an Alaskan Type B Certificate (Principal) in educational leadership. It was envisioned that this single set of statewide program requirements adopted by the University of Alaska would lessen the costly duplication of instructional services and staff development training programs within the state. The unity suggested in this plan would promote a clear, flexible academic sequence for students contemplating entrance into Alaska-based studies in school leadership. Students residing throughout the enormous 586,400 square-mile state could seek academic advice, petition for admission, attend classes, complete internships, satisfy evaluative measures, and receive a recommendation for professional certification at any of the three campus centers located in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau. Further, the shared academic structure was to feature close interaction among university faculty and administrative personnel with educational leaders in the state's public school systems and related professional organizations. The prototype of this first cooperative venture was seen to offer the potential to guide the merger of all certificate and graduate degree programs in educational leadership.

GOVERNING THE PROGRAM

Since the mission of the program was to operate in a statewide fashion, a Coordinating Consortia composed of three members (or

their designee), one from each of the campus programs, would supervise the operations of the program. The Coordinating Consortia members were to confer at appropriate times to forward proposals to the respective university faculty and administrative bodies for consideration and implementation. The varied duties of the coordinator group include the creation of a student admissions committee (composed of university professors and public school practitioners), the selection of public school mentors (nominated by school superintendents and appointed to affiliate academic rank by the university administration), the scheduling of sequence courses, the monitoring of student progress, and the evaluation of closing portfolios of work accumulated by students throughout the periods of internship. To adopt a positive means of reaching closure on operational issues, the Coordinating Consortia members were to adopt proposals after a majority consensus was reached. To maintain a close working arrangement with scholastic and university personnel, the university coordinating team meets periodically with a Program Advisory Board (comprised of three deans, three faculty program heads, one elementary school principal, one secondary school principal, and one school superintendent) to consider proposals and program modifications. The coordinating officials monitor the following program elements at various times during the academic year:

1. Admission standards and procedures
2. Campus- and distance-delivered academic services.
3. Year-long internships.

4. Portfolio reviews.
5. Certification endorsement recommendations.
6. Post-study mentorships.
7. Summer sessions and periodic forums in leadership.
8. Evaluation of the program.

PROGRAM ELEMENTS

To gain entrance into the credential program, the applicant must possess a master's or higher degree in education. As a single exception, a student may be conditionally admitted if he or she has been accepted into one of the three campus master's degree programs. It should be noted that the principal credential candidate MUST complete the program outlined below AND possess a master's or higher degree at the completion of studies to receive institutional recommendation for this state certificate. In addition and in conformity with state certification regulations, the graduate must have at least three years of satisfactory experience as an elementary or secondary teacher with a regular Alaska teaching certificate or a comparable certificate from another state.

All program applicants must have attained a 3.0 grade point average (equivalent to a "B" on a 4.0 scale) in prior undergraduate or graduate study. To demonstrate proficiency in writing and computer-mediated communications, each applicant must submit an acceptable portfolio that shall include (1) a formal statement of educational objectives, (2) a sample of professional writing, and (3)

an affirmation of the ability to participate with instructors, mentors, and cohorts in network telecommunications. The applicant must provide a written recommendation from a school district official approving or sponsoring the internship and verify access to the school system's communication platform that links to the University of Alaska Computer Network.

A structured personal interview with the selection committee's designated major professor provides the opportunity to assess the administrative and personal attributes of the candidate, discuss the schedule of campus and internship activities, and confirm the assignment of a program mentor to oversee the progress of the field-based activities. The professor- and practitioner-mentors may be assigned at either of the three campus centers.

In addition to the special focus of each individual course in the sequence, the curriculum emphasizes the integration of important themes throughout the academic and internship experiences. Those special topics designated for continual reinforcement include (1) cultural diversity, (2) large and small schools, (3) comparative leadership perspectives, (4) technology and communications, (5) contemporary issues, (6) personnel and labor relations, (7) educating students with diverse needs, (8) political, historical, and philosophical perspectives, and (9) managing change. Each of these themes needed appear in each of the course offerings listed below. Candidates in the credential program must complete each activity sequence.

Summer One (12 credits)

Introduction to Educational Leadership & Organizational Behavior (3 credits)

Law & Ethics in Education (3 credits)

Instructional & Curricular Leadership (3 credits)

Social and Political Foundations in Alaskan Education (3 credits)

Fall Semester(6 credits)

Principal Internship I (3 credits)

and

Leadership Seminar I (3 credits)

a. Finance & Facilities

b. Personnel & Labor Relations

c. Community Relations in Diverse Settings

Spring Semester (6 credits)

Principal Internship II (3 credits)

and

Leadership Seminar II (3 credits)

a. Finance & Facilities

b. Personnel & Labor Relations

c. Community Relations in Diverse Settings

Total program: 24 credits

Summer Two

Available to students seeking core courses to complete M.Ed. Degree requirements.

INTERNSHIP, THE PROGRAM CENTERPIECE

The most valued and highly visible element of the "learning cooperative" is the year-long internship. It comprises one-half of the academic program and is equal to the total credits listed in the introductory campus-based course work. The prominent place accorded the internship was endorsed by the academic policymakers, by those who supervise the interns' site activities, and by those participating in the field experience. Each intern must spend one calendar month in full-time administrative services during the fall and spring semesters covered in the assignment. In addition to fulfilling designated internship tasks during the two semester terms, the work-scholar maintains academic contact with the campus instructor through weekly audioconference class sessions in the form of a leadership seminar. The leadership seminars focus on three themes throughout the year, (1) finance and facilities, (2) personnel and labor relations, and (3) community relations in diverse settings. Assignments and discussions in these three academic segments link scholarship with school leadership functions.

School district and campus mentors work with the intern-scholar during these distance-delivered discussions. Mentors working with interns in the schools are approved by the district's chief school officer to participate in the internship program. The scholastic mentors are recommended for adjunct professor appointment within the university system by the Coordinating Committee. Close,

productive, and supportive cooperation among the practitioners, professors, and students is maintained in the planning, implementation, and evaluative stages of the internship.

CULMINATING EXPERIENCES AND CONTINUING MENTORSHIP

To validate and reflect on study-internship experiences, students engage in a one-week closure exercise with program advisors at the end of the spring semester. At this time, a portfolio of documents accumulated in the internship experiences is evaluated by the students' academic advisors. Upon completion of studies, students continue to nurture in a post-program mentorship for one year. The purpose of this relationship is to foster a bond betweeen university professors and public school practitioners and students via UACN E-mail and PORTACOM (a designated private bulletin board conference for "Learning Cooperative" use), personal counseling, professional meetings, and recommended University of Alaska "Job Fair" activities.

EPILOGUE

Many educators working within our nation's educational systems have responded to the clamor for institutional reform. Numbers of scholastic practitioners and college professors throughout the country have joined cooperative ventures with individuals and groups beyond campus walls to strengthen program offerings by fashioning desirable and valued changes in the very nature of public

educational services. Such has been the case in the state university system in Alaska. Although physically isolated on the "Last Frontier" (located over a thousand miles from the nation's nearest contiguous state, Washington), university administrators in Alaska adopted productive means to assess the effectiveness of providing pre-service training activities for educational leaders. In a novel, pioneering spirit, university officials linked with school superintendents and other key leaders in the state to share responsibilities in designing, operating, and evaluating a single sequence of study to replace a trio of traditional university campus-bound programs that had been competing for students and financial resources.

Unique elements of the merged program feature university-school district cooperation, yearly appointment of practitioners to adjunct instructional status to assist in approving and supervising student interns, and a balance between campus- and field-based course work. These cooperative ventures have created an extremely large professional umbrella to span, figuratively and geographically, the entire state with unity and clarity of purpose in training the state's future educational leaders. It appears as if the "University of Alaska Learning Cooperative" model offers promise to those seeking professional harmony among divergent groups voicing demands for reform among higher education programs.

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